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GOVERNOR JOSEPH RITNER

Historical Address

— By —

Edward W. Biddle

Read before the Hamilton Library Association, Carlisle, Pa.,
on Friday Evening, October 17, 1919



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MONUMENT AT THE GRAVE OF
GOVERNOR JOSEPH RITNER
SEVEN MILES WEST OF CARLISLE

On July 18, 1901, the legislature of Pennsylvania appropriated the sum of three thousand dollars "for the purpose of erecting a marker for the grave of Governor Joseph Ritner in the churchyard of Mount Rock, Cumberland County." A commission consisting of the Governor of the State, the Judge of this county and the Senator from this district, was appointed to carry out the terms of the act, with the result that in the fall of the following year a handsome granite monument adorned with a bronze bust and inscribed tablet was erected at the proper spot. The dedication took place on the after-

noon of October 15, 1902, and on that occasion it was my privilege to make an address which with some modifications constitutes the present paper.

Born of an humble German family in Berks county on March 25, 1780, while this country was in the throes of revolution, Joseph Ritner never had the advantage of school training except for a few months when he was a stripling six years old. As his parents were comparatively unfamiliar with the English tongue he was first taught to speak and read in German, and to the day of his death his pronunciation had a decided foreign accent. After partially learning the trade of weaver which was the vocation of his father, he came to this county at the age of sixteen and obtained employment as a laborer on the farm of Jacob Myers, near Newville, receiving the first year for his services the sum of \$80 and in subsequent years \$120, the latter being the highest wages paid at that time.

In 1802 he was married to Susannah Alter, daughter of a well-to-do farmer in the neighborhood, and by laboring in the field when occupation could be had there, and at other times working at the loom, he saved money enough to enable him to buy a pair of horses and a wagon. In the fall of 1805 he placed upon the wagon his wife and two children and his household goods and migrated across the mountains to the farm of his wife's brother, David Alter, situated in Plum township, Allegheny county. Fortunately this brother owned a number of books, mainly in the German language, and into these the young man delved with persistent purpose, thus laying the foundation of his future prominence. In 1809 he removed to a tract of land in Buffalo township, Washington county, containing 150 acres, which he had purchased for \$1300 payable in five installments. When he acquired possession of the tract only 25 acres were ready for the plough, the log cabin of the former owner was too small for occupancy by his family, and there was no barn and but little fencing on the property.

Before taking his wife and children there he built a log house for their accommodation, and in later years erected a substantial residence with front of cut stone, also a spacious barn, planted orchards and otherwise highly improved the premises. Upon this homestead, which had been carved by his own toil out of the wilderness, he and his family continued to reside until after his election to the highest office in the Commonwealth. By the sweat of his brow he earned his daily bread, personally cultivating the land and harvesting the crops, and in dull seasons using his teams to haul merchandise to the eastern cities and to bring back goods which were needed on the farm. The scythe and the flail were but as toys in his muscular grasp, and many of the native giants of the forest fell before the powerful strokes of

his axe. The flock of sheep which browsed through the clearings furnished the wool for the family's homespun clothing, the silk worms in the cocoonery yielded a finer thread, the neighboring maple trees gave up in the spring an ample supply of sugar, and the good housewife and children were industrious, all contributing in their respective spheres to the common weal.

Did not happiness dwell at his fireside? May we not apply to his home life the sentiment which appears in a beautiful verse of Tom Moore, written after his visit to America?

"I knew by the smoke that so gracefully curled
Above the green elms, that a cottage was near,
And I said, 'If there's peace to be found in the world,
A heart that was humble/hope for it here.'"

A school house was early^{might} located on the farm, in which most of his ten children received their education and some of his sons officiated as teachers. In September, 1812, he enlisted in the army as a private and served for seven months through the ensuing winter campaign, his health being considerably impaired by its hardships.

His ability and excellent character having gradually been recognized by the people, he was elected a member of the house of representatives for six successive terms beginning December, 1820, and during the last two terms of said period he occupied the position of Speaker. In 1829 and in 1832 he was nominated by the Anti-masons for Governor against George Wolf, a Democrat, but was defeated in the former year by 16,443 votes and in the latter by 3,170. Prior to 1829 he had been a steadfast Democrat and as such had been sent to the legislature, but upon the formation of the new party which selected him as its original standard bearer he allied himself with it and afterwards became a Whig and then a Republican. It is worthy of note that his first nomination was entirely unexpected and that he was working in the harvest field when informed of it. This recalls the legend of Cincinnatus, who is said to have been plowing on his small farm at the time swift messengers brought to him the intelligence that he had been chosen dictator of Rome. In 1835 Mr. Ritner was again placed at the head of the Anti-mason ticket, and by reason of a defection in the opposite party which resulted in the nomination of two Democratic candidates was elected by a plurality of 28,219 and took his seat as Governor on December 15th of that year. The silk gloves and stockings which he

wore at the inauguration were wrought by the skilled handiwork of his wife from the product of his own silk worms and mulberry trees.

His annual message to the general assembly on December 6, 1836, contained such a pointed reference to slavery that it made him famous throughout the land, and drew forth from Whittier the ringing lyric entitled "Ritner". After historically reviewing the advanced policy which Pennsylvania had pursued since 1780 in favor of abolishing the cruel traffic in human beings, he said:

"These tenets, then, viz: Opposition to slavery at home, which by the blessing of Providence has been rendered effectual; opposition to the admission into the Union of new slaveholding states; and opposition to slavery in the District of Columbia, the very hearth and domestic abode of the national honor, have ever been and are the cherished doctrines of our State. Let us, Fellow Citizens, stand by and maintain them unshrinkingly and fearlessly."

The following is the first stanza of the Quaker poet's lyric which commemorated Ritner's brave words:

"Thank God for the token! one lip is still free,
One spirit untrammelled, unbending one knee!
Like the oak of the mountain, deep-rooted and firm,
Erect, when the multitude bends to the storm;
When traitors to Freedom, and Honor, and God,
Are bowed at an idol polluted with blood;
When the recreant North has forgotten her trust,
And the lip of her honor is low in the dust,—
Thank God, that one arm from the shackle has broken!
Thank God, that one man as a freeman has spoken!"

In the month of January, 1837, Whittier had gone to Harrisburg to attend an anti-slavery convention and while there met Governor Ritner. The above poem was written immediately after his return to Boston and in the later editions of his works is preceded by this explanatory note prepared by himself:

"Written on reading the message of Governor Ritner, of Pennsylvania, 1836. The fact redounds to the credit and serves to perpetuate the memory of the independent farmer and high-souled statesman, that he alone of all the Governors of the Union in 1836 met the insulting demands and menaces of the South in a manner becoming a freeman and hater of slavery, in his message to the legislature of Pennsylvania."

Whittier and a companion were appointed by the American Anti-Slavery Society in the summer of 1839 to travel through Pennsylvania and employ speakers to awaken the conscience of the nation in regard to slavery. It is to us

a matter of interest that on the afternoon of July 8, 1839, they came to Carlisle from Harrisburg, stayed all night at the house of a man named McKim, and on the next morning drove out to Ritner's farm near Mount Rock and spent an hour and a half with him. They then returned to Carlisle and later in the day continued on their journey to other points.

The message of December, 1836, also embodied the Governor's views on other public questions which were then being much discussed. In it he called upon the legislature to repress secret societies because of their evil tendencies and demoralizing effect upon the people; also to check the growing spirit of speculation in stocks and land by refusing to create any new corporations except upon the most certain proof of their necessity, and of the accomplishment of the proposed object beyond the power of individual enterprise. He gave it as his opinion that the unnecessary formation of artificial bodies serves to foster and perpetuate the thirst for gain without labor; unduly increases profit and decreases risk, thereby paralyzing individual effort; takes away responsibility, both moral and pecuniary, except to the small extent of actual investment; multiplies influence and aids deception; and finally, begets confusion and panic in society.

On June 13, 1836, an act of assembly had been passed consolidating and amending the common schools laws. This matter was near to the Governor's heart; hence in his message he drew attention to the condition of the schools and recommended the permanent annual addition of \$100,000 to the ordinary appropriation of \$200,000. "The best interests of the Commonwealth", he said, "are at stake upon the experiment of common schools. All the energies of the State should be applied to it until success be achieved, or until the system be clearly proved contrary to the public will and incapable of producing the desired result."

In his last annual message bearing date December 27, 1838, he joyously furnished the following data indicating the very flourishing condition of general education under the recently enacted laws:

"Instead of 762 common schools in operation at the end of the year 1835, and about 17 academies (the latter in a state of almost doubtful existence), with no female seminaries fostered by the State, she has now 5,000 common schools, 38 academies and 7 female seminaries in active and permanent operation, disseminating the principles of literature, science and virtue over the land. In addition to these, there are many schools, academies and female seminaries of a private character, equally useful and deserving in their proper sphere."

It is well known that subsequently he regarded the development of the common school system as the most important work of his administration. Thomas H. Burrowes, *ex officio* superintendent of common schools, in a report to the legislature in December, 1838, spoke thus concerning the value of his efforts:

"When the agitating divisions of the day shall have sunk into comparative insignificance, and names be only repeated in connection with some great act of public benefaction, those of George Wolf and Joseph Ritner will be classed by Pennsylvania among the noblest on her long list; the one for his early and manly advocacy, and the other for his well-timed and determined support, of the free school."

In the summer of 1838 he had been nominated by the Anti-masons a fourth consecutive time for Governor, thus breaking all records before or since except that of Governor Simon Snyder, but David R. Porter defeated him by a majority of 5,504. Whilst the movement which carried him into office three years before was still strong, yet his extremely hostile attitude toward slavery had aroused a bitter feeling against him among the slaveholders of the South and their northern sympathizers, and no effort was spared to secure his downfall. National issues were injected into the exciting campaign, and by this method sufficient votes were changed to secure his opponent's election. The returns upon their face gave to Mr. Porter a majority of several thousand votes, but the friends of Governor Ritner claimed that a number of the returns were fraudulent and that a correct count would insure his election, wherefore they advised that the figures be ignored until they had been investigated. On October 15th the Anti-mason state-chairman issued a manifesto to his adherents in which he said:

"The opponent for the office of Governor appears to be elected by at least 5,000 of a majority. This is an event to which, if it had been fairly produced, we as good citizens would quietly, if not cheerfully, submit. But there is such a strong probability of malpractice and fraud in the whole transaction that it is our duty peacefully to resist it and fully to expose it." And again: "Until this investigation be fully made and fairly determined, let us treat the election of the 9th instant as if we had not been defeated and in that attitude abide the result."

The stormy scenes which followed are without parallel in the official life of this State. Upon the convening of the general assembly on the first Tuesday of December, a fierce struggle for control ensued when the contesting claimants to membership appeared. In the house of representatives each party elected a speaker and both of these

officers took seats upon the platform. The upshot of the contention was that a crowd of politicians and their backers, coming principally from Philadelphia, forced themselves into the legislative chambers and became so noisy and violent that both branches of the assembly hastily adjourned, some of the members escaping through the windows. The business of the Commonwealth was absolutely suspended for several days, and the Governor ordered out a portion of the militia with instructions to march at once to Harrisburg and likewise called upon the federal government for assistance. Major Generals Robert Patterson and Samuel Alexander, the latter a practicing lawyer of Carlisle, proceeded to the seat of war with about a thousand militiamen, but President Van Buren refused to interfere. The real cause of this refusal was that the intrepid Chief Executive of the Keystone State did not stand in favor with the Democratic officials at the national capital, and they foresaw that the protecting presence of the United States soldiers at Harrisburg might result in his continuance in office for another term. He subsequently complained bitterly of the partisan and insulting reception which had been accorded to his request for aid, his feelings in the matter having been intensified by the incessant attacks of a hostile press.

After the turbulence had continued for nearly three weeks the senate voted to recognize the Democratic organization of the house, and what has since been famous as the "Buckshot War" came to a termination. Said appellation owed its origin to the circumstance that a number of the cartridges supplied to the troops from the arsenal contained buckshot instead of bullets. Governor Ritner in his message later in the month ascribed the whole difficulty to the assumption of power by some of the return judges to reject the vote of a district, or part of a district, instead of confining themselves to the merely clerical duty of adding up and certifying the number of votes which were actually cast.

On January 15, 1839, the Governor returned to private life, and in the spring took up his residence on a farm in West Pennsboro township, the deed for which was executed to him by the Carlisle Bank on April 8th. The tract contained 278 acres and the consideration mentioned in the instrument was \$12,510, of which he paid \$7,000 in cash and gave a mortgage to the bank for the remaining \$5,510, the cash payment doubtless being realized from the sale of his Washington county property. This inference is supported by the averment in a friendly political pamphlet, issued in 1838, that the Washington county farm with its stock when he left it to assume the governorship was worth \$7,000 and constituted the whole of his fortune.

In the following year he was afflicted with cataracts in both eyes which for a time made him totally blind. An operation on his right eye entirely restored its sight and enabled him to read without difficulty, yet the cutting caused so much pain that he refused to have it repeated on the other one which consequently remained sightless thereafter. In 1848 he served for a short time as director of the Philadelphia mint under an appointment by President Taylor; but the President died before the appointment was confirmed by the senate and his successor named another person for the place. He was a delegate in 1856 to the convention of the newly formed Republican party which nominated John C. Fremont for President, and always continued to manifest an active interest in politics. He also remained a warm friend of the common schools, which he had fostered in their infancy, and for many years his venerable form was a familiar sight at the annual meetings of the teachers' institute in this county.

After enjoying a peaceful and honored old age he died at the home of his son Jacob in South Middleton township on October 16, 1869, bowed down by the infirmities of nearly fourscore years and ten. No other Governor of Pennsylvania has ever reached such an advanced age, no other has shown throughout his life more individuality and earnestness of character.

It is hard to speak too highly of Joseph Ritner. Despite the early drawbacks of poverty and lack of education he rose because nature had implanted in him the seeds of success—consisting in his case of a superior and well-balanced mind, an upright moral character, powerful convictions coupled with firm resolve, industry, perseverance and courage. In person he was stout and somewhat above the medium height, with a large head and broad chest, dark eyes and swarthy complexion. Many years of manual labor had developed a naturally strong physique, and had invested him with a stock of surplus health which was never drawn upon to repair the ravages of dissipation. It was but an incident of his temperate habits and power of self control that he did not indulge in either spirituous drink or tobacco, and was not diverted at any time into a luxurious style of living.

The massive head and strong face, so well shown by his portrait in the capitol at Harrisburg, indicate that he was possessed of much more than ordinary ability. His messages were well and clearly expressed, and conveyed the views of a broad-gauge, thoughtful man upon matters that were then deemed of paramount moment. In "Old Time

Notes of Pennsylvania" by Colonel A. K. McClure, who had an intimate acquaintance with Ritner for many years, the author says of him:

"He was a man of very general intelligence, unusually familiar with all public questions, and was a delightful conversationalist. His rugged honesty and kind neighborly qualities made him beloved by all who knew him, and even when he had reached the age of fourscore and ten his face would brighten as he spoke of the progress of the common schools."

right — To persons of the present generation who have observed that five-sixths of the highest civil offices in this country are filled by lawyers, it probably appears exceptional that Mr. Ritner, who had no legal training, should have attained the governorship of a populous Commonwealth. In former days, however, a different rule existed, for greater consideration was then given to laymen in the distribution of places carrying with them profit and honor. In illustration of this I call your attention to the fact that of our earliest Governors after the adoption of the constitution of 1790, Joseph Ritner being the eighth, only one was a member of the bar, namely, the meteoric Thomas McKean; while of the nine Governors from 1861 to 1907, only one was not a member of the bar, namely, John W. Geary. Strange to say the tide again changed in 1907 so far as it relates to the office referred to, and of the four Governors since that time, all of whom are still living, not one is a lawyer. But this recent condition is very exceptional, and it is an undoubted fact that formerly knowledge of the law was not deemed as important a qualification for high public position as it has appeared to be in later years, indeed it is doubtful whether ordinarily it was considered a qualification at all. Our government was then in the formative stage, and sturdy common sense was relied on as affording the surest foundation for a safe development. The three immediate predecessors of Governor Ritner sprang from German stock, one of them being an ordained minister of the German Lutheran church, from which we may infer that the Governor's Palatinate descent and inherited traits were in a general way helpful to his political advancement.

Shoulder to shoulder with him during his administration stood the radical and eloquent Thaddeus Stevens, who entered the house of representatives in 1833 and served with little intermission until 1840. His wonderful speech in favor of the common school system delivered to the members of that body in April, 1835, most of the senators and state officials being present, had electrified his audience, rescued the school law from repeal and saved the State

from the disgrace of a return to old conditions. Upon this subject, as well as in relation to slavery and secret societies, the views of the bold and patriotic Ritner and the brilliant Commoner were in perfect accord, and together they worked for the establishment of those cardinal doctrines which would insure universal freedom and general education.

Stevens passed over into the great Unknown in August, 1868, only fourteen months prior to the death of his aged friend, and upon his tombstone in an obscure cometary in Lancaster is cut an inscription composed by himself, declaring the principle which he had advocated through a long life to be "Equality of Man before his Creator." The same words might with propriety be carved above the remains of Joseph Ritner, who likewise battled strenuously for a protracted period to break down the distinctions created by wealth and color. He was endowed with unusual strength of mind and body, was honest, industrious and earnest, and his well spent life was productive of valuable results of which we are now reaping the benefit. His ashes repose in a quaint country churchyard at Mount Rock, seven miles west of Carlisle, at the side of the turnpike road leading to Chambersburg. Concerning the monument which has been placed there by the State as a tribute to his public services and worth, it is a pleasure to be able to say—that it is of chaste and classic design, perfect in symmetry, constructed by skilled workmen from materials of the finest quality, and destined for ages to come to suitably fulfill the purpose of its erection.

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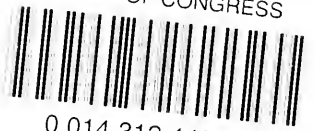
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